



**Connecticut Education
Association**

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Executive Director

Policy & Professional Practice
Mary Loftus Levine, Director
Capitol Place, Suite 500
21 Oak Street
Hartford, CT 06106-8001
860-525-5641, 800-842-4316
Fax: 860-725-6328
www.cea.org

Affiliated with the
National Education
Association

Testimony of

*Mary Loftus Levine, Director of Policy and Professional Practice
Connecticut Education Association*

Before the

Education Committee

Re: Raised Bill No. 6432

An Act Concerning Closing the Academic Achievement Gap

February 28, 2011

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Mary Loftus Levine, Director of Policy and Professional Practice for the Connecticut Education Association, representing over 40,000 educators in our strong public schools.

The Connecticut Education Association proudly supports the concept of creating a task force and an "Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap," with the goal of creating a master plan. Our members know first hand the challenges we face and work hard every day to do whatever they can to close the gap. We applaud the effort outlined in this bill to provide support, resources, and the coordination of effort needed. Here are a few suggestions:

1. We testify today to respectfully ask that classroom teacher and specialist voices be present and heard on the next task force. In the recent past, this has not always been the case. Educators, better than anyone, know what works, what doesn't and hasn't, and what we need to do to get there together. If we were overhauling any other system, business, or industry, it would be unthinkable to do so without the experts in that particular field's knowledge, expertise, and voice at the table. Let's do it together and get it right this time.
2. But before we embark on this journey, let's look at what's already in place that is working. We cannot keep starting, stopping, and starting over. Educators are quite frankly overwhelmed with a myriad of new initiatives, particularly ones that are not research

based, otherwise referred to as "the flavor of the day." We need sustained focus and clear direction.

3. Providing model curricula is a great piece of this bill. Our poorest districts need this resource as they simply do not have the capacity that our wealthy towns have. Good curricula is a basic need, coupled with staff professional development to assist implementation.
4. Many ideas contained in this bill are already happening; for example, district identification, plans, programs and reporting go on regularly through the Connecticut Accountability and Learning Initiative (CALI). Scores are up and progress is being made.
5. This bill thankfully focuses on two major challenges that need attention if we are ever to close the gap – early childhood intervention, culturally-relevant education for the growing number of non-English speaking students, and all day kindergarten. These programs work.
6. This bill addresses certification reciprocity with other states, as did PA 10-111 last year, which is also a wise move to address labor shortage areas.
7. Although low achieving districts can lengthen the school day and/or year now, this bill seems to encourage them to do so. However, we believe what is really needed is time for and access to "wrap around" services (before and after school sessions), for things like homework help, cultural activities, field trips, access to sports and technology, music and art lessons – all opportunities affluent students already have which help to close the gap.

We look forward to having the opportunity to work collaboratively with all of you to continue to address this challenge. Thank you.